

Education Governance Responses
Brattleboro Meeting (4/2/07) - Brattleboro Union Middle School

81 Attendees (facilitated by George Appenzeller)

Question #1: What are the advantages and disadvantages of the present education governance system in your community?:

Advantages

Maximum local control
Closer control over specific aspects of school
Less feeling that decisions imposed on you
Schools are heart of the community
Some/limited ability to control cost
Geographical containment – cooperative
Union board structure works
Public access to school officials is good
Fiscal accountability is good
Special Ed costs consolidated helping to reach critical mass cost effectiveness
Equal representation from towns weighted by population for high school board
More school board members buy more involvement
Money being well spent
Easier to change direction
Local school boards are able to hire own staff
Simple process
Could attract more candidates for administrative positions
Small classes
Direct negotiations with staff
“In touch” with culture of town & school
Volunteer boards
Know facilities, students, and teachers
Accountability to tax payers
Closer to students
Some schools have middle school/high school choice
Reflects individual community variations in educational ideas
(Why compare unique Vermont to other states?)
Promotes volunteerism
More control of curriculum
Less politics
Superintendent is a common link
Curriculum coordination is fluid
Community values are reflected
Easy to run for board
Quality policy development and enforcement
More accountability for principal & teachers w/regard to school board
Why change a system that is not broken. (Statistics show that VT students out perform other states)

More people are involved with their schools – greater link between parents & children in the educational process
Town meeting feels relevant – you’re discussing your own town’s school
Elementary board focuses on elementary issues (& secondary)
Ability to make decisions at local level
School governance accessible to public
Shared Supervisory Union special education & support services
High national test scores – highly educated children
Direct contact with Superintendent
Focus on town’s uniqueness
Community connection & support for innovation
Likelihood of more people voting on school budgets

Disadvantages

Coordination with union-wide programs and ideas
Extra meetings for some
Some towns hard to keep boards full
Superintendent has many bosses and meetings
Overlapping issues – high school/town
Supervisory Union board seem redundant
Larger school boards cost more money
WSESU board is lesser entity
Leaders serving too many masters to be effective
Local voters apathetic & don’t participate until something goes wrong
Duplicate resources waste money
Teachers have imbalance of power in negotiations
Not enough population to support cost
That Super stretched too thin & quit
No direct vote on WSESU budget
Duplicate efforts: meetings, curriculum, budgets, policies
Superintendent and principals serve different boards
Difficult to share resources – disincentive to share
What local control do we have now?
No local control of curriculum
No local control of schedule
Can only hire teachers approved by State
Representation in local schools would be diminished
Are we seeing economy of scale?
Boards can “micro-manage”
Supers have “a lot” of meetings
Very small classes
Very high taxes
Some redundancy in policies & purchasing
Added costs – redundant personnel/staff
Too many leadership positions to fill
Dramatic turnover in higher school administration – burnout
Cumbersome – economy of effort
Greater potential for educational inequities
Less options/opportunities to access broader curriculum

Inadequate services for special needs students
Variances in population impact smaller schools
Lack of cohesive resource sharing
Structure of supervisory union/districts and respective boards is difficult to understand
Many stakeholders – difficult to reach consensus
Higher cost per pupil
Superintendent doesn't pool resources with all the school boards
Drain on resources (board, supt., principal & business admin.)
Very little ability for local communities to really control budgets (SpEd costs, NCLB regs, healthcare costs)
Very different levels of (support or opportunities) (financially & services)
Lack of strong local voices at state level (and federal)
Establishment of new or flexible programming is very difficult – have to deal with many boards (stifles creativity)
People aren't applying for principalships because of number of meetings.
Central staff spread too thin
Too complex structure – too many governing bodies
Boards not in sync with each other
No one with authority to force politically unpopular decisions
Hard to make staff cuts (it can get personal)

Question #2: What are the advantages and disadvantages of the school district model suggested by Commissioner Cate in his White Paper?

Advantages

Innovations, promising practices can be shared more easily
Fewer meetings/duplicate efforts
Shift resources to address needs in the Supervisory Union
Strengthened organizational capacity to solve problems, meet school quality standards, strive for excellence
Pooled resources save money w/some potential of some money saved (Board Members)
Standard curriculum
Suggestion of a paradigm change
Simplification
Potentially freeing up dollars
Allow schools to offer broader educational opportunities
Might improve efficiency of board
Small towns would have proportionally more representation
Streamlines job of superintendent
Opportunity to share resources (although currently available & being don in some schools)
Cost savings (?)
Allows more time for superintendents to do jobs
Centralized budgeting
Shorter lines of communication
Easier sharing of resources
Economy of scale (bulk purchasing)
Class consolidation when classes are small
More diversity

Maximizing staffing levels
More efficient use of business office resources
Uniformity in programming; technology, pre-school services, program development
Principals could focus more on instruction, curriculum & assessment just reporting to Super
Less stress on administration
Cut per pupil costs by consolidation of services
Possibility of school choice
More efficient use of central staff
Trying to address problem with public discussion
Makes sense for some geographic areas
Solve building crowding issues & school capacities
It could be easier to keep smaller schools under the spending cap

Disadvantages

Fewer people believe they have a stake/ownership in the school
Loss of unique identity – all schools the same
Decisions are made farther from the students
Limited representation – too few board members – too much work for board members thereby no one will run
Greater apathy & budget vote attendance
Statewide contract costly for us
Impact with mistakes can be huge
Marginal Superintendent can be hard to fix
Hard to make the elephant dance
Difficulty with change
Concentrates too much power with too few people
Loss of local control
Small towns would be outvoted
Top down rather than bottom up proposal – need to start with children
Transportation costs would increase
Would probably need to redraw some boundaries
Board would only have time for policy & finance
Knowing problems particular to a school would be lost
Lack of specific information, re; budget approval, board membership (how are union high school represented?)
Does not define basic education – what do/should we pay for
Converting of board volunteers to possible paid positions
Where is the taxpayer?
Power shift to Gov. & Commissioner
“Top down Model” – where does it put the student?
Presumed economy of scale
Inequities based on population
Control too far away
Hiring done with less community inputs
Possible closing of schools - taking community control farther away
Lack of response to local issues
Promotion of homogenization
Geography
Lends itself to consolidation – may not be positive consolidation

Shatters the illusion of local control
Too much bureaucracy that might reduce the quality of education
No elected board members have authority and responsibility over the principal
Will not satisfy or maintain the high level of education
Members of community have less access to decision makers
Principals wouldn't have board to report to – just one representative – what if there's a communication issue?
Local communities wouldn't have the ability to decide on own services (i.e.; busing)
Question – chain of command?
Centralizes all power to State Department of Education – is bigger cheaper & still yield student performance results?
Vagueness of Cate proposal – lack of specifics, “cookie cutter”-ish
Lack of data to support “success” of Cate proposal – will it benefit the greater good?
Weighted voting negatively impacts small towns
No cost-benefit analysis
Doesn't address major cost drivers, e.g. health insurance, special education
Failure to connect the problem statement with proposed solutions
Distances schools from the origin of child

Debrief Comments:

It is laudable that the VT legislature is putting off a decision – waiting for input from these forums
DOE needs more capacity as a service organization than just a regulatory agency (funding)
Whatever system, there needs to be local statutory ability to have balanced representation on boards.
Compromise with OLD model – specifically keep local boards and empower sharing of resources, as in Superintendent working with out-lying boards.
Have a governing board that facilitates
Why has legislature already moved forward?
Are there other governance models?
What about a drop from 280 districts to 120 – a more gradual reduction
Has there been a study of other small-population states and their structures?
Is the chief reason for this financial, or what's best for the kids?
Does it make better sense for us to focus our resources (lawmaking) on creating solutions to health-care costs and unfunded (federal) mandates which won't improve with this system?
Funding formula is too complicated & inequitable – common level of appraisal –Cap (Special Ed budgets being included in budget)
Could school districts cooperate or consolidate without adopting the Cate model?
Governance is not broken – funding is broken
Identify what a basic education is and how to pay for it
Identify & study cost drivers of education – special education, health insurance
State should stay out of this
How to address escalating special education costs?
School vouchers
Make county districts
Transparent spending & budget planning for taxpayers
Are there really any cost savings?

Fewer leaders – better leaders
Would smaller communities lose their representative voice?
How specifically does new plan decrease costs?
Bi-cameral representation model: (e.g. by town & by population)
Impact of special education & its funding? Plus arts, sports, & music programs?
What prompted 1892 school district consolidation? Was there an educational improvement?
Elected Commissioner of Education
Why are larger schools not seeing the economy of scale that they should be?
Encourage towns to consolidate when it makes sense for them
If imposed, allow towns veto power for some changes- big towns can't control
Let districts decide their own fate & pay for it
Spread cost of special education & take it out w/cap figures
Commissioner should enforce minimum statewide curriculum standards
VT should look at state Regents exam
VT should look at state-wide teacher contract
Governance should change to reflect current demographic educational demands
One size doesn't fit all – consolidation may make sense for some, but not all
Let state help poor towns w/out taking away from others
State take over of special education
Establish school based committees w/specific responsibilities – solve local problems
Adjust funding formula to encourage sharing of students and resources across town boundaries
S.U. board votes twice on all measures to pass. One town, one vote (a la Senate) and vote proportionally by citizens (or students?)
What if a staffer parent had a problem with the principal and you go to Superintendent to no avail. Next step to S.U. board?
Are we, in the small towns, the victims of the socio-political phenomenon – the “chauvinism of small difference”

Final Discussions:

Quick discussion; issues need more time, we felt rushed. Don't like Cate proposal. Unhappy legislature started work.
Most of us are afraid of loss of local control.
Question: What is weighted vote? This is systemic disenfranchisement.
I'm not in favor of the Cate proposal; if it isn't broken, don't fix.
No evidence of cost savings in the proposal. To sell the idea you need to show the cost savings.
Appreciate the process and forum
Resources need to be shared between districts – this happens in Windham Central
After 30 meetings, what is the next step? (1) review the data, (2) review random sample survey, (3) draft a report for the late fall of '07 for legislature & governor.

Thank you for some arguing and putting this out there.